

JONATHAN STRANGE & Mr NORRELL

Susanna Clarke

It had been languishing impressively on my coffee table for some weeks staring at me reproachfully, awaiting that moment when I had the strength to pick up a book that let's face it weighs the equivalent of a good-sized premature baby and would need the equivalent number of gestational weeks available to read it.

I had just that very week attended my local library book group that is more of a review and recommend (or not) session and there it was in someone's stack.

Imagine my horror when they declared that they had kicked it into touch 50 pages in as 'another load of magical rubbish' (surely incurring severe injury in the process?). I had been so looking forward to reading this mainly on the strength of the unanimous support it received from the non-Booker panel judges (i.e. people like me who have busy lives and don't have time to be misled by prizewinning titles that may ultimately disappoint).

Undaunted I decided this was one occasion when I would venture in and see for myself. What's that quote..."stop all the clocks..."? Well in our house it became stop all cooking, cleaning, shopping, in fact put life itself on hold, this in the weeks before Christmas! One review I've read says "it's a good job this book is the size of a house as it's a book you want to move into" and it occurs to me that this total immersion method of reading is good advice to offer before suggesting anyone embarks on the huge journey that reading this book demands. I am convinced this is an unusual reading experience that many readers may miss out

on without adequate preparation so I feel duty bound to offer some advice to would-be travellers.

Drips and drabs of reading will not do, treat this book like a long haul flight down to putting on the flight socks if you are at risk of a deep vein thrombosis as you will be riveted to your chair for the foreseeable future. If you can organise a helpful stewardess-like person to bring you regular sustenance all the better though you may be well served making the trip to the kettle and the food yourself to ensure your circulation gets the occasional workout. If you are lucky enough to have a fire, light it as this is a book to curl up into and lose yourself for 782 pages. It is a winter read I think totally incompatible with a deckchair on a beach. I would also suggest a cushion on your knees to prop the book up (remember the baby comparison?) and heed the plight of a friend who found this advice decidedly wimpish and is now nursing a nagging wrist injury.

So what on earth is this book about? Well, suffice it to say that Clarke takes the familiar world of the 1820's and inserts the premise that magic had actually worked in the Renaissance but the ability to perform it successfully had somehow declined until the emergence of Mr Norrell. He can perform magic from books and then along comes Jonathan Strange who works in a somewhat more cavalier fashion to his own recipe. Known historical events are given a perfectly logical magical twist as by this time Clarke has enabled you to suspend disbelief and enter her world. Much of this is very funny indeed and if you thought Wellington

outmanouevered Napoleon at Waterloo think again, it is perfectly obvious that Jonathan Strange organised for the removal of the entire country of Belgium to a remote part of America for an afternoon while things got a bit tricky. But of course why hadn't that occurred to me before? Clarke aids your journey into this hinterland she creates by the clever use of footnotes. How tempting it is to skip these as superfluous but don't. Footnotes are usually the factual, evidence-based supplement to information that you have just read that ground you in reality, well of course these footnotes are quite the opposite and ground you even further into the unreal world of the book. You start to become mildly disorientated much like some of Clarke's characters who become very confused about which world they inhabit.

As an aside, think 'film' as you read and you will see what a marvellous one this book would make. Personally I'm always happy if I can find a part for the likes of Alan Rickman and I think he would fit in well here so that's fine.

Much is made these days of books being too long and needing editing and if anyone should hint to me that this was the case with JS&MrN then I would pay good money, possibly sell a cat or something, to have those edited bits because had this book been 1000 pages it would not have been too long! Do you know that feeling when you approach the end of a good book? It's located somewhere between the extremes of joy and gratitude for the experience and grief verging on bereavement at the loss to come when you reach the final page. I made the last 50 pages last a whole day. You need to prepare carefully for your move into the post

JS&MrN world. Every book you pick up will be too light, too short, too unmagical, too normal. I eventually settled on *The Fall* by Simon Mawer, I don't know why but it was good, the gripping account of the ascent of the North Wall of the Eiger somehow took my mind off the fate of all my friends in JS&MrN. I've read that it took Clarke 10 years to write this book and I'm now in the horns of a dilemma. It clearly took that long to create such a masterpiece and I would be mortally disappointed to find any sequel was weak but 10 years is such a long time to wait.

As to whether it is good reading group material well that's a difficult one. This book seems to have deleted all my critical faculties and I have warned friends to whom I have recommended it (this is a lot, it's another problem, you want to convert everyone) that for once I will not enter into any negative debate about it. For me it was such a wonderful reading experience that I feel no need to defend it in any way, nor do I really want to delve into it too deeply. So far they have all had exactly the same experience as me (or so they say for fear of upsetting me!) and we are talking here about people who think nothing of any worth has been written since about 1950 when it comes to modern literature.

It is not in my eyes a book to dissect and deliberate over whilst trying to invest huge and meaningful philosophy into its purpose, it is a book to move into and inhabit for that wonderful complete reading experience that we need like manna for the reading soul and are lucky enough to find every so often.

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